

Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project
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Interviewer(s): Wendi Zhou

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WENDI ZHOU 00:00:19

Hello, this is Wendi Zhou interviewing Tracy Lai on Friday, April 23 for the Working in the Time of COVID-19 Oral History Project. This is a remote interview and I'm in Bellevue, Washington and Tracy is in Seattle, Washington. Thank you, Tracy, for agreeing to be interviewed and for taking the time to hop on this call. I'm just going to start off with a few demographic questions. So please tell me your name. And can you please spell out your first and last name?

TRACY LAI 00:00:55: My name is Tracy. T-R-A-C-Y. Last name is Lai. L-A-I.

WENDI 00:01:08: Alright, and how old are you? What is your birthday? And where were you born?

TRACY 00:01:14: I'm 63 years old. And I was born in San Francisco—Chinatown—across from the cable car barn.

WENDI 00:01:27: And what is your birthday?

TRACY 00:01:30: My birthday is [redacted upon request from speaker].

WENDI 00:01:38

What gender, if any, do you identify as and what are your preferred pronouns?

TRACY 00:01:43

My preferred pronouns are she/her and I identify as female.

WENDI 00:01:50

What race or ethnicity do you identify as?

TRACY 00:01:55

I identify as Chinese American, I'm third generation.

WENDI 00:02:01

And how important is your racial or ethnic background to you?

TRACY 00:02:06

Oh, I would say that my identity as a Chinese American is really central to what I do, and to who I am in the world.

WENDI 00:02:22

So can you talk about what social, political, ethnic, racial, or religious communities you regularly connect with or participate in?

TRACY 00:02:33

Okay, that is a big list. Well, I think it is different right now, in the time of pandemic, because of—kind of the quarantine and shelter in place. So I'll start by saying, I feel that in this past year, my interactions with communities have been much, much diminished. But in a general way, I would say that my—through my workplace, I'm quite involved in my union. And that union is American Federation of Teachers [AFT]. And so there's a lot of the—political work that has to do with our working conditions. And there's my state federation, AFT [American Federation of Teachers] Washington, in this last year, has been undergoing a process to become anti-racist as a union. And so that's, well, we're trying to imagine something very differently. I think that socially, it's—it's hard to kind of separate everything. A lot of my—kind of my longtime friendships are also through union related work, but more through the Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance [APALA], which is a national organization that is multi-union and has members from many different Asian and Pacific Islander ethnicities. And I'm active in our Seattle chapter, as well as serving as a national officer. So you spend a lot of time doing those things. And so for me, that's part of my social support and additional other interaction. And then there's family

(*laughs*) and there's friends and so through that, you're kind of connecting to the other, your other—your relations, other involvements, in whatever form they might take.

WENDI 00:05:17

And where do you live now?

TRACY 00:05:20

Oh, I live on Beacon Hill and I've lived here in this particular location for over 30 years.

WENDI 00:05:32

Alright, thanks for sharing your answers. Now we will move on to questions about your occupation. So what is your occupation or profession?

TRACY 00:05:42

I'm a community college instructor. And I am tenured as a historian at Seattle Central College. So that means I'm a full time instructor. In addition to teaching the History classes, I also teach American Ethnic Studies, Women's Studies and a few International Studies classes. In the recent years, maybe the last 10 years or so, I've become increasingly involved in Asian Studies and issues pertaining to globalization.

WENDI 00:06:25

How long have you been employed in that job?

TRACY 00:06:29

I have taught at Seattle Central as a full time instructor since 1992. And I was an adjunct instructor eight years before that. So you could say my professional career has been largely shaped at this one institution, although in the early nineties, I also taught in women's studies at the University of Washington.

WENDI 00:06:54

Oh, wow. So how long have you been a member of the union you're currently a part of?

TRACY 00:07:03

I've been a member very shortly after I began to teach as a part time instructor. And it was because other colleagues encouraged me to become a member and explained to me what our union was about. One of the first meetings I ever went to was a caucus for part time instructors. And it was really helpful to meet other people who were in a similar category as I because it was very mysterious. You'll—you seem to only get a contract every three months, and I just—I couldn't understand how, how does this work? How do you plan your life three months at a time, and you never know exactly how many classes you might be offered to teach? And so the caucus was really helpful in explaining some of the politics of that, and also some steps that I could take to be more proactive for myself.

WENDI 00:08:23

Yeah. And what offices have you served within this union?

TRACY 00:08:30

Oh, well, so Seattle Central is part of a three campus district and so collectively, it's the largest local [union]. In the best economic times there's over 1,000 faculty among the three campuses. So what that means is that our local has a lot of different roles that people can take up. You can represent your division in the faculty senate, and serve as a senator. So that's something I've done. That Senate has a president, and I've served in that capacity. I've been Secretary because you need to document, always, the decisions that the group has made, leave a record so people understand what the process was. And then in addition to campus level offices, we have a district wide executive board, and I've served on that level as well, both as a Secretary and then in 2013, I was a Co-president, with my colleague. And I think we made a little bit of history because she's African American and I'm pretty sure it was the first time there had been presidents, much less Co-presidents who were both women of color.

WENDI 00:10:13

So now we will go through questions about your work. So can you run me through a typical day at work before the pandemic, from the time you woke up to the time you went to bed?

TRACY 00:10:28

Okay, so Seattle Central had—still uses the structure of many face to face classes that met daily in those fifty-minute blocks, so Monday through Friday, you meet for fifty minutes. And history classes were largely arranged that way. A full time load for faculty is three five-credit classes. So typically, I might be teaching from nine to nine fifty, and then ten to ten fifty, and then maybe twelve to twelve fifty. Every [day], Monday through Friday, so—so that's kind of the in-class structure. In addition, you're expected to have office hours so that you can be available to meet in person with students. And so I would just try to arrange those sort of close to when I was also teaching. And then you make appointments if students are unable to come at that time. In the afternoon, there are often meetings that full time faculty are expected to serve on, they could be tenure committee meetings, where you're trying to help mentor and support a new hire. It's—it's approximately a three year process. There are committees that pertain to curriculum, and assessment, accreditation... You know, a variety of committees. Probably some of my favorite committees had more to do with things like—we would have an annual Day of Remembrance to remember Japanese American incarceration during World War Two. And we had developed a campaign to save a fountain that's located on our main floor, a fountain that was sculpted by George Tsutakawa, who's actually an internationally renowned sculptor. It happens that George Tsutakawa was a high school student at Broadway Edison High School, which is the site of Seattle Central, and he donated this fountain to the—what became the college, but it also had become expensive to maintain this piece of artwork. So our Day of Remembrance kind of folded all of that in. And what I valued about working on that is that students were part of it, staff were part of it, I really enjoyed being able to work with other

college community members, because the other committees I described are very, centered on just faculty or faculty and administration. And, it's important work, but I find events like Day of Remembrance also really fulfilling.

WENDI 00:13:47

Just to clarify, does Seattle Central College run on a quarter or semester system?

TRACY 00:13:53

We are still a quarter system.

WENDI 00:13:57

Yeah. So it seems like you're busy. And I was wondering how your work has been impacted or disrupted by the pandemic?

TRACY 00:14:07

Well, as you might recall, the announcement or declaration of pandemic came rather suddenly. And I remember we were still towards the end of Winter Quarter in 2020. And we learned over the weekend that the college would be closed, and that we just would have to finish everything online. And it felt very abrupt because there were still about two, two and a half weeks left in the quarter. So I think—as many educators would say, pandemic really upended what we had been doing. And all of my classes in that Winter Quarter had been face to face and we had a website but it was—students did not enroll in the class, because it was largely online instruction. And so it was a bumpy transition, well, for everyone, because it felt—it felt in some ways disconnected, you know, so that if on Friday, we had a discussion that we thought we were going to be continuing the following week, you couldn't necessarily have assumed that you could just pick up the conversation. And now in this environment, and I do remember the first Zooms that we tried to do, and it was pretty difficult because it was so new to everyone. And I think for many students, the technology needs were suddenly, they were—it probably felt kind of extreme that you really needed to have the working camera, and internet that was stable, and all of that. So I think most of the people in my classes were able to wrap up, but I know that some students, just—it was too much, it was just really overwhelming. And they were just not able to complete the course. In the college overall, we had a big discussion about, what does no harm grading look like? Because it just felt really wrong to fail people in the midst of a pandemic, and so the traditional assumptions about who passes and who fails, we just had to set that aside and talk through what could be fair, and what to do for the students who just kind of drifted away, because they just couldn't—there were so many other things going on. Answering email about a class was at the bottom of any list we might be keeping. And we still wanted to—we didn't want to further harm that individual.

WENDI 00:17:48

And around this time, were you designated a frontline or essential worker by the Washington Governor's "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" order?

TRACY 00:17:57

Well, since we were teaching online, we were not classified as frontline.

WENDI 00:18:08

Did you ever feel in danger or that your health was threatened on the job as a result of the pandemic?

TRACY 00:18:16

Well, let's see. So, since I was in a category of instructors, who did not have labs or clinics, where you might have to actually interact directly, I didn't have that kind of concern. And at the same time like everyone else, in a general way, there was that constant anxiety about exposure to COVID and potentially catching it or spreading it—just to me, it was a constant level of anxiety. Just that—that's been hard for everyone.

WENDI 00:19:16

So I'm going to ask a related question. How did your work responsibilities change with COVID?

TRACY 00:19:27

Well, let's see. I think the change—one change is that because we were now online, boundaries between work and anything else that you needed or wanted to do in your life, we're—we're more blurred because it might be related to student needs. You know, so that if the only time that a student could interact with you, and they really, really needed support, but they needed to have an appointment in the evening, which in pre-pandemic times, I'm not usually an evening instructor. So we would just figure out a daytime way of interacting. And then, so the kind of boundaries between what, when are you supposed to be available? I think because now, so much of the communication is through email, I think there's a little bit of a sense of, I've already emailed, so now I'm waiting for you to hurry up and respond. So I try not, I mean, I tried to—we suggested ways of framing, most replies will be through Monday through Friday, or whatever days, you designate an hour so that students or other colleagues won't take offense that you didn't reply within two hours. This was really important, except that they might have emailed at 6 p.m., because that's—that's when it happened. And then they're waiting, waiting, waiting, and they're frustrated that you haven't replied, but that might be your only block during the entire day, that was actually, Sorry, it's family time, or it's personal care time or something like that. So I do think it—it is harder to designate and just sort of let something wait—it will get done, and it might need to wait a little bit so that it can also fit into what is more reasonable for me. Unlike my other colleagues who are also caring for children, or other people, just other people in a household, I don't have to balance that additional responsibility. But I do also have other needs and other projects and other things that I've committed to doing and they should—they could have, in a pre-pandemic world—fit in. So I think those things are really challenging as well. I find that the technology of teaching from home effectively has also kind of raised the—either expectations, or just kind of raised the bar—on how to go about the online instruction. You know, and I haven't bought an additional monitor so that I can do the dual screen

thing. I haven't bought additional demonstration whiteboards so that I can have surround—and I can, you know, kind of the performative aspect of online instruction. I haven't done that and I don't know if that is regarded as somehow delivering less than what students deserve or what students want. It's a quandary.

WENDI 00:24:18

And speaking of the same topic, you mentioned in your preparatory meeting that the pandemic had exposed a lot of inequities related to technology, the digital divide, etc. So as a faculty member and educator, what are your thoughts regarding online education during the pandemic, and especially the inequities that have been exposed as a result?

TRACY 00:24:45

Yeah, so there's certainly—there's inequity that faculty are also experiencing because even though we have been told that we can apply to purchase, you know, to purchase other equipment that could enhance or is necessary to instruction, we are also reminded that it is now owned by the state [of Washington]. And so you can't really just buy what you think would be best because well, the state has designated, recommended... I don't know. So you know, so there's—so that's a little bit awkward. And I do know at least one instructor who petitioned to take her office equipment home, because that actually would have been the best possible setup. And there was a long that—okay, maybe it wasn't long, but there was a drawn out exchange in order for that to be approved. And meanwhile, the quarter just keeps moving. Because that—she petitioned because she realized that teaching chemistry on her home, personal, laptop was just—it was not what it needed to be compared to what her office desktop had, as part of the setup. So something that we faculty share as an inequity would be the digital divide of access to stable internet. And so both faculty and students have had the unfortunate, spontaneous, you were in the Zoom [meeting], and then you were out. And it's really awkward when you're the Host as the instructor, and I know, as I struggled to come back in, I came back in and students would—you could hear them saying, "Hey, do you think she's coming back? How long should we wait?" I just felt so bad for them. And I thought, well, this is less than professional, but also something I don't have a lot of direct control over. Now, I actually now, in agreement with my partner, we have purchased a higher level—like, for more money—we are supposedly faster internet and better bandwidth and so on. But we were able to come to that agreement, and not all of my colleagues and certainly not students [could]. I think one of the most insulting things that I heard when I expressed concern about students' access to stable internet, it was said that, well, "Can't the student just go and try to piggyback on the signal off the college?" And I had this image of a student sitting on the curb, trying to move things around to see if the WiFi was like, Okay, I'm here, I'm here! And I thought, I—just even the most motivated student, a student who genuinely [thinks], I want to do well in the class, I need to do well in the class, because I'm trying to graduate, and, you know, genuine students—that is really harsh. And I don't think that's a very—that itself is not a suggestion that is sustainable, you might be able to for the purposes of getting an assignment turned in, like, okay, I can make this happen. But honestly, how often are you going to go sit on the curb, or in a car, or wherever, right?—to try to catch that signal? So it's been really challenging. I

have any number of students who live in a complex where the best WiFi is in the common room for the complex that they live in, but you can only sign up for an hour at a time. And so they have said to me, I don't know whether I should spend more time on my chemistry, my math, or my history class. And what are you supposed to say, because we should never ever discourage a student from working on other classes? You can't just say, Oh, my class is more important. And they know already that one hour is not going to cut it. So they'll sign up again when they can, but there's all these other people ahead of them. So I think that really magnified it—online instruction can work well, but it's uneven. It's very uneven.

WENDI 00:29:55

Thank you for telling me about this. So as a member of union leadership, what actions did you or your union or coworkers take to address issues in the workplace?

TRACY 00:30:09

Yeah, so my union—I was not part of these negotiations. But what our leadership did was work on a memorandum of understanding—an MOU—between the union and the college administration pertaining to these changed circumstances. And so the first MOU looked at some kind of compensation for the extraordinary adjustments that were necessary with the sudden declaration of pandemic. And so they figured out a formula based on what kind of a class you were teaching, how many classes you're teaching, and so on. And so there was a lump sum that was paid out to people who had to work through that transition in Winter Quarter. So that's one example. The key part of this is paying close attention to the changed circumstances under which people are working, and trying to ensure that there is fairness, that there's equity. There—I mean, there's continued discussions, because things are changing. And now—right now, we're looking at the conditions under which people might be teaching on campus. And I think that's still in discussion, because it's a limited number of classes and number of faculty.

WENDI 00:32:12

And, in general, how would you say the company or the management responded, and in your situation, it would be the administration?

TRACY 00:32:23

Well, I think they have tried to be understanding. And yet, I think that—especially the highest level administrators, such as our Chancellor, or the Vice Chancellors, who—their entire role is administration, and they have very little contact directly with students. And with faculty, actually, they just because they're very—they're systems, people, you know, they're not, not working with people very directly. So I think that has made it kind of challenging. Even though I believe they're trying to be understanding, and yet, I think there can be a gap just because of their position in relation to what we faculty do and what students are experiencing.

WENDI 00:33:46

So in general, as a union member, do you know how interactions with the administration or any other situation related to the pandemic would compare to non-union workers in your industry?

TRACY 00:34:06

Whoo. Well, I think that our union has been important. Important, because even when conversations have not been very satisfactory, or conversations have not led to the kind of agreement that faculty prefer, at least administration feels obligated to have that conversation. And I think in a non-union environment it's "Good luck to the individual," because you're truly on your own. And for a non-union faculty person, if you don't—well, if you've never had the experience of trying to advocate for yourself in that kind of discussion, it can be really intimidating and you may very well just say, Oh, well, it's the pandemic, you know, this is too hard. How do I even—how do I even put in words what I'm experiencing? And how do I formulate a possible solution?—and this is where I think the collective knowledge of the union is very helpful. Because then you have sort of this—a body of experience, even though it was all pre-pandemic. But you have a body of experience and what it can suggest as a remedy, whereas if it's just you trying to be thoughtful, and, well, This seemed like the good possibility, I think that is a weaker position to be in.

WENDI 00:36:24

Thank you so much. So the next question concerns government and civil society. Have you accessed government or community support due to the virus?

TRACY 00:36:37

Well, yeah, of course. Let's see—well, thinking about getting a vaccine appointment. I certainly was trying to use the state's system, which now I'm forgetting the little name that it gave to that process. But, you know, I registered for it. And then thereafter, I was getting texts to tell me, Oh, you're in the right category, now you can get an appointment and that kind of thing. On the other hand, in terms of community support, the way that I actually got my vaccines was word of mouth. And that happened because a nonprofit organization in—I think Rainier Beach, I think the name of it was something like Southeast Family and Youth Services [Southeast Youth & Family Services (SEYFS)]. They were helping the City of Seattle do outreach and make appointments with people of color in south King County. And while I don't really view Beacon Hill, my home base, as south King County, the person who called me was another colleague who lives further south. And she said, "You should just call and let them decide if you fit in the outreach that they're trying to do, because otherwise vaccines can go unused." So I find it a little bit ironic in this high-tech age, that the way that I actually got my appointment was a random text from a friend who just said, Hey, are you vaccinated yet? If you aren't, call this number. And I was like, okay, I could call it, though who am I speaking with?—and she said, Don't worry about it. It's a scheduler phone number for this nonprofit group. And they are trying to reach as many people as they can, because otherwise, the whole set of vaccines will get wasted. So that's how I came to get it. And I was grateful, extremely grateful, extremely relieved. And it was word of mouth.

WENDI 00:39:21

So would you say you faced any challenges in getting the vaccination?

TRACY 00:39:28

Well, I think once I had the appointment, everything went really smoothly. But I definitely had that anxiety of, Oh, am I gonna get this through my healthcare provider and that system or how exactly does Lumen Field [vaccination site] work, you know, just in trying to keep an eye on the information that was available to the public. But I did keep thinking about, What about folks who don't have internet access, or don't feel that comfortable searching online? And that's actually one project that other Seattle APALA chapter members participated in, was to help people arrange those appointments because it just felt too complicated.

WENDI 00:40:29

Alright, thank you for your answers. Now, I will go on to ask questions about your typical day during the pandemic and your overall experience. So, did you ever get sick?—and sick meaning kind of any illness—or know anyone who did?

TRACY 00:40:47

Let's see, I've been pretty fortunate and have not had illnesses. I've had a couple of—had a few concerns with something that kind of happened to my eye and toothache and things of that nature, but nothing like, Oh, is this COVID? At the same time, I certainly heard from students who were tested as positive. Just two days ago, I heard from a student who had a blood clot related to her second dose of the vaccine. So it definitely—you know, I've had an elder uncle who has been hospitalized multiple times, although not because of COVID. But there's a concern that you're in that environment, and then it's scary for anybody at any age to be hospitalized, and you just feel really bad that all you can do is wait outside the hospital. Because under these current protocols, you just can't be one more person in the room.

WENDI 00:42:12

And were you ever quarantined? And what has it been like?

TRACY 00:42:17

Um, I—Not having tested positive nor my partner, I haven't had to go through that, in a direct way. The uncle that I was talking about—his adult children, one lives out of state. So in order to visit, they did quarantine themselves as recommended in order to visit in person. But again, that didn't happen just to me.

WENDI 00:43:02

So you mentioned earlier about your friend who texted you the phone number for the vaccination, but have any family, friends, neighbors, or strangers helped you as a result of the pandemic in other ways?

TRACY 00:43:26

Well, I think there's been—Sounds silly, you asked such a straightforward question. But I started thinking about, What kind of help, right? And I would say, something that I'm really appreciating—and I think it's related to pandemic and the more limited ways that we have for interacting—so the thing that I've been appreciating is that, for some of the issues that I've been working on with other colleagues, there's just been such a high level of response, because email and texting and maybe phone calls as well, is, you know, we don't get to see each other in person. So I do feel that people's efforts to keep the work moving along, to try to help analyze a situation and figure out how our group—whichever group it is, APALA or AFT 1789—you know, figure out what we should do. And I really appreciate that because without having that exchange and effort and initiative, I think I would—well, I know I would just kind of be left to my own devices to worry as an individual and worry—worrying, sometimes I might come up with some great idea out of that. But worrying generally for me is not that productive. Worrying is sort of like, Oh, this can happen, this could happen, this could happen. But instead of just all the things that might go wrong, if I can kind of work out, well, here's what we could try to do, then I can see something positive come out of that, and that has kept my spirits up even without knowing, Are we still in a pandemic? Is it truly the fourth wave? You know, What is going on now?

WENDI 00:46:12

Yeah, speaking of which, what has been the most challenging part or parts of life during the pandemic for you?

TRACY 00:46:21

Oh, I think the relative isolation has—because initially, and I would say even generally now, CDC, Governor Inslee, the public health officials have cautioned all of us to try to limit where you're going, ask yourself if you really need to go to one more store or be outside your home. And it really—it just so changes who you talk with and maybe, to some extent, what you talk about. So, that part, I think, is kind of—it can feel pretty lonely. And then I think with the recent anti-Asian attacks—that's all I can call them—it's also made me feel more concerned about doing anything by myself, because if I do, am I somehow taking a risk that is unnecessary? And I even mean that, like, I'm a—I was—a bicycle commuter, that was a highlight every day and I have had a lot of confidence riding around my neighborhood and running small errands, and so on. And I have to remind myself, it's not just about being a safe bicycle rider, and, you know, ride defensively, but I also now have to think about, well, Maybe I shouldn't ride this bike trail because it's somewhat isolated. And it probably isn't a very smart thing to ride by myself. So that is challenging.

WENDI 00:48:58

Yeah, definitely. The pandemic has led to a wave of anti-Asian hate. So have you had any personal experience with incidences of anti-Asian hate or know anyone who has?

TRACY 00:49:12

Well, [I] definitely know other people through Seattle APALA chapter. We've—people have talked about just getting yelled at on the street, and one particular story stands in my mind. It's a woman who lives in Redmond and was shopping with her young child, and in Costco this white person came up and started yelling at her and got really hostile and it really frightened her child, and no one around them—none of the Costco personnel—did anything. And she was so taken aback and shocked. She just walked away from her basket, you know, tried to get away as fast as she could. And then she felt really ashamed. And she wasn't sure what to do about that. And so in the conversation, it was actually with some other APALA people, people who had come to one of our webinars and [Washington State] Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos really encouraged her to report it, even though it feels like, But now it's happened two months ago, she said, and Representative Tomiko Santos said, It's important that it's documented. And even though it's hard, because when you document it's like going through it all over again—you can't breathe, you feel like an anxiety attack is happening. But I was really glad that Representative Tomiko Santos made that suggestion. And then we also asked if she would feel comfortable or would like our chapter to actually write like a formal complaint, in support—is in her support. Like, write that to Costco and call them out on what kind of a store you are running, you know, and to call attention to what happened and that they really need to be vigilant, because how many other customers are experiencing random hostility?—and it doesn't take much for it to be pushing and shoving. And something else, you know, these things can escalate in a heartbeat. The one thing that happened to me but because the words that were being yelled at me were a little garbled, I'm not—I don't know for sure if it was anti-Asian, I do know that there was a lot of hostility. And I think I was riding my bike with my husband, and we were on Beacon Hill. And it was a car going by, somebody rolled down their window, and they yelled at me something about my mask. It could have been that they thought I was not properly wearing my mask. I—now maybe they yell at every bicycle rider that they see. And so it's actually even handed that their personal approach is, I always yell at all bicycle riders, because I think the majority of them are not wearing their mask correctly. I don't know. You just—these things can go very badly. So in the incident that happened to me, I was riding on Beacon Hill with my husband and a car came from behind, the person on the passenger side rolled down their window and started yelling at me. And it was a little hard to understand what their words were, I think it had something to do with my mask. So it actually reminds me of some of the difficulty around what constitutes a hate crime. Because I think currently, for it to be classified as a hate crime, we have to be certain that part of the words expressed that racial slur, so I'm not sure how that should be regarded other than, I definitely felt unsafe. And I did worry that not only would they continue yelling these things, but that they might try to actually use their car to push us off the road or just do something intimidating in the ways that when people are acting out on hostility, they may just do it. So I definitely empathize with anyone else who has experienced this, some kind of random outburst. And I don't know if it's because of how I'm perceived as a middle aged Asian woman on a bicycle.

WENDI 00:55:22

Yeah. So I'm going to move on to a question about your typical day during the pandemic. Can you walk me through a typical day in your life during the pandemic, from the time you wake up to the time you go to sleep?

TRACY 00:55:44

Okay, so we'll just take this quarter—Spring Quarter—as my reference point. This quarter, I'm teaching three five-credit classes, they're all online, and they're all different topics. So what that means is, just to state something obvious, it means that the content and the assignments, and any lectures that I might record, are all completely unrelated and separate. Okay, so on a typical day, I would probably wake up at about 6:30 or 6:45 a.m., and try to have breakfast with my partner, and start looking at emails that haven't been replied to probably by between eight and 8:30. And then on a given day, there might be office hours, there's one class that has one synchronous meeting, so we don't meet often in person, but we do have that one meeting. And so I would say most of my teaching-dedicated time and appointments-slash-office hours-slash-teaching are pretty much in the morning, maybe through twelve or 12:30. And then after that, there could be any number of other kinds of meetings. They could be individual appointments, they—with a student for work on an assignment. And then committees that I'm currently on include a tenure committee, a committee that's working on a grant proposal to the National Endowment of Humanities under the American Rescue Plan—there's actually money out there, but you have to compete for it. We had a division meeting. There was a faculty listening session on grades and grading scales, because now that we're all online—well, we should have been talking about this before, but kind of also realizing that the grading scales that everyone's using may actually be a little bit different and trying to determine is a little bit different okay or is it like, Oh, an A in this class can be earned, you know, at this level? Okay. Not to sound alarmist, but, you know, to realize and appreciate that. Indeed, the cut off for a decimal grade of 3.5 may look kind of different in different classes, and just having more conversation about and is it okay, this different kind of A, or is it actually something that needs to be changed? So all of those meetings—the latest meetings—there might be a union meeting that starts at five and finishes at seven. That doesn't happen every day. I also attend meetings related to the state federation. So those might be at four o'clock for an hour. APALA has committee meetings, that are national committee meetings and national officer meetings, so those are kind of interspersed. Yeah, the day can be pretty full and on a lucky day I'll try to carve out maybe an hour and a half so I can just walk out—walk with my partner out in the neighborhood around the block a couple of times. And if our schedules don't match because he has lots of other things he's working on and participating on, then well, I could be grading in Canvas. Didn't even tell you what part of the day those things are happening, but students are always anxious and interested. I try not to have meetings in the evening. So if I can eat dinner around 6:30 or seven, then I try to just have unscheduled time where I might just be able to read. It could be personal reading, it could be reading related to classes, but just kind of have some. Well, I hate to say it, I'm using a Kindle reader, so it's still a screen. But it's not my laptop screen. *(laughs)* For a while I was making fabric masks, so I used to spend more time making masks.

WENDI 01:01:16

Speaking of masks, what was your experience or the experience of your family or social circle in wearing masks or practicing social distancing or other strategies?

TRACY 01:01:32

Well, I would say—so my partner is a retired nurse. So—just as context, there was no question that we would follow the science. And so you know, he's been carefully following CDC and public health recommendations. So I think we were early adopters, if you will. And so in that context, I would say, our circle of family—there was no question related to that, as we learned about the research about what masks were made out of, and that kind of information. As that became available, I tried to modify what I was doing so that we could get kind of a better fit. And I don't know, I didn't do a strict count. But I think—so then my goal became, I wanted to make sure that all of the people in my—kind of my immediate family could each have enough masks so that they would have a chance to wash and dry them, because it's so—we felt that was important that once you've worn it, then you should really clean it, these fabric masks. So that means I probably made at least eighty fabric masks. And then along the way my cousin introduced a new model, which I really like—it's called an origami fabric mask, and it has the three layers. And we have learned that silk as a fabric is more effective than their—even the high density cotton. So—and we're still wearing masks when we walk around outside unless the street is completely empty. You know, then we might pull it down or hold it in our hands but we see any kind of movement on the street and we just put it back on.

WENDI 01:04:12

To clarify, what is your living situation, meaning how many people do you live with at your place of residence?

TRACY 01:04:23

Yeah, I am living in my home with my husband and we are the only two people.

WENDI 01:04:41

To sum it all up, how has the pandemic impacted your sense of well being—you mentioned being quarantined, you mentioned anti-Asian hate, but how has all this impacted how you felt about your life during the pandemic?

TRACY 01:05:02

Well, I think, like many people, I am continuing to process what this over a year has meant. Sometimes I think, especially when I listen to my adult children, I think, perhaps this feels like a lost year—a year where many things were put on pause, because it had to be put on pause. And I don't mean that they were unemployed. Fortunately, they were able to stay employed. But sheltering in place, and vastly limiting who else they interacted with—it has, I think, put other—this experience is putting perspective for me on many, many things, because the overall loss of life is staggering. And so I think in that sense,

individual and personal health is ever more precious, and not to be taken for granted. It's given me a chance to reflect on work. At the age of 63, I have given a little bit of thought to, Gosh, when and can I retire? But honestly, I feel so fortunate to be employed, and my two adult siblings are not employed. And while I'm not directly supporting them, I do feel—I want to feel as if I can help support them, if that's what it also comes to. Because the economy may be getting back on its feet, but as we know, not all sectors are employing and my siblings are not—I have a younger brother, but "younger," he's still in his 50s—I have an older sister, so that means in some sectors, she would be regarded as even more senior. And so those are harder categories in—no matter how skillful you are, I mean, you're just—there's not supposed to be age discrimination, but you know, you just may not look like their first-choice candidate. So all of these things are in my mind, when I think about, Can I retire, should I retire? I also worry about things like—I have—it's always been a goal of mine to see more faculty of color teaching in community colleges, and with the devastation that higher ed is facing, you know, the enrollment has—we're down at—in my own division, so that's not the college as a whole, but in my own division, which is arts, humanities, and social sciences, we're approximately 17% less than we were a year ago. And I have a fear that if I were to retire soon, that one, they just won't replace History because History is not STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math). And did you know that college students are largely being encouraged and directed, if not by family and counselors, there's more money in scholarships if you go to certain STEM fields, and it's not in History, it's not in Women's Studies. It's not in American Ethnic Studies. So I have a fear about a disappearing program. I have a fear about, if you hire and you're looking for people who have experience then the recent graduates who are more likely to be students of color because the higher numbers of students of color were in the more recent period than in—Yeah, I have a lot of things I'm worried about. So yes, pandemic has caused me to rethink many things.

WENDI 01:10:19

And going off of that, how do you think life will be different after the pandemic? And since that's a pretty broad question, I was wondering, as an educator, how specifically for either instruction in the sphere of higher education or just the fields you mentioned?

TRACY 01:10:41

Right. Even before pandemic, I know that our Vice President of Instruction liked to say that he believed hybrid classes were the future. And what he meant by that, is that research seemed to suggest that the best combination for students in higher ed is partially meeting in person, and partially online. Now, the trick question is, How much? How many times should we meet in person? You know, what's that supposed to look like? So I remember him saying that, because even when he said it, I remember feeling a little bit skeptical, I think, because at that time, I wondered, well, but hybrid right now, at Seattle Central, is taking so many different forms. You know, there's some hybrid classes that meet seminar style for ninety minutes a week. And then there's some hybrid classes that only meet fifty minutes a week, and so, maybe that's good. I mean, to have that variety, maybe that is fine. But I remember feeling like, Well, I want to know more about where we're getting this data, and probably want to know more

what students themselves are saying about it. Anecdotally, so just from students, I believe they appreciate the flexibility. And I think by that they mean not being tied down to lots of in-person (inaudible). So the comment on things that they miss is more personal relationships, whether it's with the instructor or with other students in the class. That even though they like the flexible (inaudible) part as well. I think higher ed is going to look really different, and I wonder about these large campuses with all these buildings. Are we really going to fill those buildings back up? Again, with lots of in person? I don't know. I don't know (inaudible) in all those buildings, and all the personnel that goes with these buildings, I don't really know where that's going to go. If I'm feeling optimistic, I will say that, out of this, we'll come up with new models that can try to satisfy multiple needs. I am sure that technology will remain a large part of that. And we still have to solve broadband access, you know, stable Internet, and things that are assumed when we say, Well, of course, technology is going to be part of it. You know, I—administration will always tell us, Well, young people, they've grown up with it, they just know. And I think, They know how to be users. They are very accustomed to certain kinds of interfaces. But that doesn't mean that they are good at managing their files. I can't tell you how many times students, I know I have that somewhere. I just, I'm not sure. And then the interface with any number of systems, it could be the site that goes with the Chemistry lab. It could be the wall map, which is what we use for the math classes. It could be, it could be anything, but just because you're young doesn't mean you have some innate intuition.

WENDI 01:15:13

After that question, I was wondering what has surprised you the most about this period of time?

TRACY 01:15:31

Well, I would say on a personal note, because I'm spending time outdoors, either walking, or in my garden, I've been a lot more attentive to bird species. I've even learned the names [of the bird species]. I'm probably thinking a lot more about [what?] led me to pay more attention to the debates on climate change and climate justice. Last quarter, the class that I taught on globalization, we just as a group, found some really—and so I was surprised at what the class was able to build together. And that that kind of gave me—well, it inspired me, it inspired me, because I think sometimes we instructors—well, because we're supposed to be in charge, we tend to think that, that sense of community and the brilliant, something that we share it or how we inspire, are taught. And those are all really important elements that can help motivate, but it's also me acknowledging what that group of individuals (inaudible), they were so supportive with each other there. And then some of them came along to a next class that I'm also teaching on women, gender, and globalization this quarter. And that class, it doesn't have—it's just a different makeup of people. So maybe the surprise was just how close you could still feel, even at such a distance. One other surprise to me during this pandemic was the success of a group called Communities for Our Colleges. And this was a coalition that was working to push forward a legislative bill, 5194 (SB 5194), called "Our Colleges, Our Futures" ("Our Colleges, Our Future") and it passed. And right now, it's just waiting for Governor Inslee's signature. So the [Washington State] House and the Senate have already reconciled the budget for it. And I was surprised at how hugely successful this coalition was in

involving students from at least a dozen community and technical colleges to organize this advocacy. They were hugely effective in training each other to testify with all kinds of legislators. They had a town meeting—town hall meeting that was attended by several hundred people, and quite honestly, in all the years that I've been involved with my union, this stands out as so effective. And I was surprised because it all happened completely online. And I think that says a lot about the key organizer, Fernando Mejia-Ledesma, but it also says hugely about the core group of leaders that he recruited, he mentored, and then they just—they did what they did. And it was remarkable. And I hope that the model will continue because it's such a huge opportunity for young people to be trained as activists, and to see the difference. This is the largest piece of funded legislation ever. I honestly, and we—administration always tells us, you can't have a better contract, because there's no money. Okay, guess what? There is now money. Now what is your excuse? Now what are you going to say when we say you have to hire, you have to convert more part-time positions to full-time. And this legislation calls for two hundred new full-time positions across the state. So we don't know which colleges will get what, that's—all of this has to be worked out. But that's so thrilling, two hundred full time positions, maybe one of them will be History, or Women's Studies, or American Ethnic Studies. I mean, by comparison, even Asian American Studies at University of Washington, there were three full-time tenured professors who retired, maybe just in the last couple of years, and it was replaced by one-year appointments. So it's good that there's still people being hired. But that's just to show higher ed is struggling to retain that foundation of full-time faculty.

WENDI 01:22:23

And one of our last questions is, can you reflect on any positive experiences in the pandemic?

TRACY 01:22:38

Well, I think because of the nature of the pandemic, which is—you're trying to understand the transmission of this disease. I think that engaging with that means thinking a lot more about health in general, you know, how can I stay healthy? How can I be healthy? And to me, that's—that becomes all the related, you know, what does your exercise look like, during pandemic? What are you eating? You know, a lot of discussion about comfort food, and in relation to what is a better—what is a diet for a healthy planet, since climate is affected a lot by the agribusiness and what the market is kind of insisting on or what seems to be profitable. So I think that's—it's an emergency way to think about health. But maybe it can be kind of a type of reset for all of us. And then maybe thinking about human, kind of, I don't know, humanity and human relationships and how important that is in terms of a sense of community, a sense of connectedness. And even though we can't relate to each other in the ways that we used to before pandemic or in the forms that we were accustomed to, I think that's the value of that is, you know, you can't—Well, what kind of value? It's so precious. It's so important.

WENDI 01:25:05

Yeah, thank you for that. Great answers. So I'm just thinking we can wrap up the interview. So are there any other thoughts you'd like to share? Or is there anything I missed that you thought was important to talk about?

TRACY 01:25:27

Well, one thought that I'd like to share is related to my involvement in Seattle APALA. And APALA is one of a variety of constituency groups—constituencies of color, that were formed under the auspices of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, AFL-CIO. And as a result of both pandemic, and also all of the racial justice protests and outrageous police violence and lack of accountability, Seattle APALA has been able to build closer relationships with the chapters in Seattle of A. Philip Randolph Institute, the coalition of Black trade unionists, and the organizing committee for LCLAA, Labor Council for the advancement of labor of Latin Americans (Labor Council for Latin American Advancement), and I really value those newer relationships and I don't know that we would have found ways to connect as often and as closely as we are now. As a result of expelling the Seattle Police [Officers] Guild from the Martin Luther King central labor council (Martin Luther King, Jr. County Labor Council), we constituencies of color have been working towards a racial justice task force within or under the Martin Luther King central labor council. And that's progress. You know, it doesn't eliminate racism, no. *(laughs)* But it's a collective action that we have been able to pursue together. And quite frankly, Zoom kind of helps us do that. Because otherwise, you know, pre-pandemic, we'd be trying to get everybody to meet together at the [Seattle] Labor Temple and there'd be plenty of people for whom the transportation alone was just like, Sorry, I love the idea but no, I can't get there. And even now, when people are starting to drive around more, there is a way to safely listen in on the call, right, hands free. And so on. And I just, I really appreciated those interactions because I have learned more—most both about leadership of those organizations and their perspectives and their—what they feel is important, as well as, it feels really productive and it feels stronger to be able to agree upon how to move forward together.

WENDI 01:29:01

Alright, Tracy, thank you once more for just taking the time to share your story and to be interviewed. And, you know, unless you have anything else, that basically wraps up our interview.